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Introduction

Student's motivation and persistence are common issues that educators and learners struggle with continuously. This is particularly significant in the field of adult education. According to Hardin (2008) these adult learners, or non-traditional students exhibit characteristics such as; delaying enrollment into higher education until adulthood, enrolling part time, working full time, being financially independent, has family responsibilities and academic deficiencies. Such characteristics can form severe barriers in the quest to pursue higher education. Therefore, understanding self-determination and motivation are necessary to help these learners to be successful. To help students to be successful, scholars and practitioners must engage in longitudinal studies in order to help students transition from General Education Diploma (GED) and other basic adult education programs to higher education. In this study, the researchers make meaning of the participant's experiences that can add data to the current research base. This study is aimed at exploring the experiences of 14 GED students enrolled in a GED to College Transitions course at a southern community college in the US during the spring 2011 semester. The study was guided by the following research question: What primary factors motivate GED students to enroll and persist?

Conceptual Framework

This paper is situated within theories of motivation, drawing upon theories of goal setting (Ames, 1992; Blumenfeld, 1992; Locke & Latham, 2002; Meece, 1994), self-efficacy (Bandura, 1997), and self-determination (Deci & Ryan, 2000). Goal theory (Ames, 1992; Blumenfeld, 1992; Locke & Latham, 2002; Meece, 1994), in simple terms, refers to learners' beliefs about their reasons for engaging in activities (Brophy, 2004). Goal setting and its relationship to motivation has been examined extensively in teaching and learning (Dweck, 1991; Locke & Latham, 2002). However, most research has been conducted in K-12 education settings. Nonetheless, goal setting is considered most effective in enhancing motivation and performance goals meeting the following criteria: 1) goals are proximal or within reach, rather than distal; 2) goals are specific rather than abstract or global; and 3) goals are considered challenging and neither too easy or too difficult to achieve (Brophy, 2004).

In addition to goal theory, many researchers and practitioners agree that self-efficacy (Bandura, 1997) plays a large role in learners' motivation (Pajares, 1996). More specific than terms such as self-confidence or academic self-concept (Bong & Skaalvik, 2003), self -efficacy refers to one's perceptions of the "capabilities needed to succeed in particular achievement situations" (Brophy, 2004, p. 64). In fact, self-efficacy can influence the tasks one chooses to engage or avoid, as well as the level of engagement in the chosen task (Pajares, 1996).

Finally, self-determination theory (SDT) draws on ideas of intrinsic and extrinsic sources of motivation. SDT suggests that an individual's motivation to learn is dependent on one's experience of feeling competent in a learning task, feelings of autonomy for performing (rather

than feeling coerced), and a sense of relatedness with the learning environment (Deci & Ryan, 2000).

   Competence. Deci and Ryan (2000), suggest that positive feedback will enhance intrinsic motivation. Positive feedback is used by the students to judge their level of understanding and grasping of concepts. This will sensitize the learner how well they organized knowledge and skills that enabled them to effectively perform a task. In other words, positive feedback is a measure of competence. It will provide the students with a sense of satisfaction and accomplishment in the content area. This satisfaction will make the student feel competent and confident. The confidence will then intrinsically motivate the students to be persistent.

   Autonomy. Autonomy has a similar effect as competence in that the feeling of control will give the student the power, feeling of freedom and the drive to be persistent. This feeling of control will give the learner the intrinsic motivation to learn. This is necessary in order for the student to be successful. Therefore, facilitators should provide the environment for the learners to feel this sense of control. This can be done by managing the classroom and instructional environment while putting greater emphasis on choice and support to the learner.

   Relatedness . Relatedness plays an important role in influencing the intrinsic motivation that is necessary to maintain the persistency of the GED students. Relatedness involves the idea that no one is an island and when there are good social interaction the student will be more intrinsically motivated. For example, according to Deci and Ryan (2000), students showed greater intrinsic motivation when their teachers are sincere and caring.

   When an individual feels adequate support in these three areas, his or her motivation, engagement, performance, persistence, and creativity are enhanced. However, whenever the student experiences a lack of support in competence, autonomy or relatedness, their motivation and engagement in learning decrease (Deci & Ryan, 2000).
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Methods

   This case study focused on 14 students enrolled in an intensive GED to college transition program at a southern community college from January 2011 to May 2011. Twelve participants were female; two participants were male. One participant was Caucasian, one participant was African American, and twelve participants were Latino/a. Thirteen of the participants have children; one was the care taker of a disabled sibling. All participants had been out of school between 5 and 25 years.

   Data were collected through classroom observations, field notes, and interviews with the student participants and the instructor. Student participants were interviewed in the beginning weeks of the course and then in the final weeks of the course. During the second interview, participants were asked to visually represent their experiences in the course as a form of drawing. Students were prompted to talk about their drawings as part of the reflection process. Interviews were audio recorded and transcribed by the researchers. Data were coded for common themes that were guided by the conceptual framework.

Findings

   Analysis of the data revealed several themes pertaining to the students' experiences with the program and their motivation for enrollment and persistence. Specifically, we found the sources of motivation for the students shifted from a goal oriented perspective to a self-

determination perspective. In addition, changes in self-efficacy were found in the students. This self-efficacy appeared to contribute to their persistence in the course.

In the beginning: Goal oriented sources of motivation

At the beginning of the semester, student participants attributed their motivation to four sources: 1) family and/or children, 2) career or job goals, 3) personal goals, and 4) the teacher and support staff.

Family and children. Family and children was the most frequently stated reason for why the student participants are enrolled in the program. One of the male students, who was a single parent, stated firmly, "I do it all for my daughter" (Mark). Similarly, one female stated: "I'm just doing it also to show my kids that I can do it, that I'm doing it. Because actually they're already, they're already past the math that we're doing here. So yeah, it's for them" (Nicole). However, beyond stating that family was their primary source of motivation for enrolling in the class, several of the participants insisted that they did not want to "disappoint" their children or families. One female student stated the following:
I told my kids I was doing it for them, so now I really can't quit cause then would see mom as a quitter and I can't let them see that. And that's why I did that. That's why I told them because I knew if it was just me, I'd be ah, you know. But now it's like my kids, you know, I can't disappoint them. (Jessi)

Career or jobs goals. Another source of motivation that the student participants frequently mentioned was career related. For many of the participants, they were working either minimum wage jobs, working two jobs, or unemployed. For example, Richard, a working, single parent stated his motivation was related to his desire to attend college: "I want to go to college, something's that way over due for me, because I got out of school around the ninth grade" (Richard).

However, in addition to the desire to further their career goals, for many of the participants, this source of motivation was tied to their motivation to serve as a role model for their children or families. For example, Jessi, who was not working at the time of the program, stated:
I need to be able to say, you know, I'm this or I'm that and not just oh I'm a housewife. I mean there's nothing wrong with it. But I want my girls to be able to aim above that, to like nursing, you know? Aim above what I already did. (Jessi)

Personal goal. Related to career goals, students mentioned that obtaining their GED and attending college had been a personal goal for them that had not yet materialized. Claudia, for example, explained: "I've been putting it off. I'm only twenty six but I always wanted to [get a GED] before I even finished school. So, but I was always been working two jobs" (Claudia). For these students, they believed that the program was their opportunity to fulfill a personal goal that they had not yet achieved. As Nicole, stated:
I want to graduate college, actually just to graduate. Have the paper to say that I did it. From there if it goes further that's fine, you know, I'll go with it. But to graduate, that's something for me. That's a goal for me. (Nicole)

Teacher and staff. The fourth most common motivational source that students described was the teachers and support staff. Students greatly acknowledged the role the teacher and support staff had on their motivation. For example, students acknowledged the supportive roles the office staff had in their motivation to remain in the program:

In regular school, a lot of teachers don't even care. They don't care at all. In this [teacher], she has the same amount and she cares. And Debbie [Program Coordinator], she's always into behind us which another good thing cause if not, I think I think if nobody were to be pushing me the way I would I'd probably be like oh whatever. (Marie)

Overall, many students felt that they didn't need to have motivation to continue with the program because of their perception that the teacher and office support staff provided the motivation for them:

The teachers are very, you know, fantastic, cause they try to individualize everything, and Debbie [Program Coordinator] has just been absolutely amazing. They do the job of motivating you. I don't really think you have to motivate yourself. They keep it going for you. (Alexanderia)

At the end: Self-determined sources of motivation

Although student participants still mentioned that their family and children served as sources of motivation for their persistence, they mentioned additional, but different sources of motivation at the end of the semester than what they had mentioned at the beginning of the semester. Student participants attributed their motivation to feelings of competency within themselves, personal autonomy in ability to do class work, and a sense of relatedness or connectedness to their classmates.

Competency. Student attributed much of their motivation to their sense of competency. For example, Prissie saw herself as "smart" and as a result, confident that she would graduate with her GED:

Prissie: [Explaining her drawing] I have my GED. I put made it. I mean, I did it, you know? And honestly I took it for granted when I was in school and now it's opened up, like, **I'm smart**! I guess you could say, like I **really understand things I never thought I would have**, so yeah. I'm excited. I'm there [graduating]. I'd been out of school for like twelve years. And now that I know I can keep up with everybody, and I'm very proud of myself. It's very motivating.

Autonomy Supported. Students attributed their motivation for persisting to the fact that they "could do it" or "figure it out" on their own, but still feeling they had support from either their teacher or peers. For example, Carly talked about her excitement regarding her ability to complete her homework: "I feel real a bit more confidence in my doing the homework and stuff like that. I feel my little brain's saying like I <u>can</u> remember this" (Carly). Similarly, Priscilla mentioned her relief that she could do her homework on her own, but took comfort in knowing that the teacher was available if she needed the support:

Because now it's easier when you go home to, to do it by yourself. Not like, you know, when somebody teaches you something you go home and you forget. And [the teacher] even has her email available so if we have any problems or what, she's willing to help you. (Priscilla)

Relatedness. Students spoke most about the sense of community that developed during their time in the program. Students recognized that they were "all in the same boat" and did not

stand alone. Therefore, they found comfort in this knowledge. For students who felt like dropping out of the program, they attributed their motivation to their peers. For example, Carly explained how her motivation for persisting was attributed to her classmates:

Carly: Just knowing that I was almost there and there are people who are doing the same thing as you. . . They say, here's my number, type thing. And I've gone through different programs and I was like, this is it? You know, no communication [amongst the other students], just the teacher. I need some interaction . . . cause without interaction, it's like isolation.

For other students, several spoke about how the intervention of their peers helped them return to class after being absent for a few days:

Claudia: I actually just missed like 2 days in a row. I had told the two girls [in class] what was going on and they were like, Claudia, get up. [They] were calling me.

They took the time, and I was all (sigh). If they hadn't called me, I probably wouldn't have come. But they did call me, and I thought, I'm going to be lost [if I return to class] but no matter what happens, you got to keep going.

Discussion and Implications

In this study, the GED students' motivational factors appeared to change over the course of the program: from factors related to family, career and personal goals, and the teacher and program staff, to factors related to competence, autonomy, and relatedness. The teacher provided scaffold, individualized instruction that allowed students to work at their own pace. She allowed time in class for them to autonomously work while providing necessary direct instruction at the points when the students found themselves stuck. She provided answer keys to the students so that they could self-check their work and allowed for the students to interact with each other as peer tutors. Most importantly, the teacher began the semester with lessons on math--the subject, perceived to be the most difficult subject for the students. Within a short period of time, the students who saw themselves as "horrible in math" were more confident with their skills once they found themselves able to complete each lesson and homework assignment on their own. This sense of mastery by the students—as a sense of competency—was one of the driving factors for the students' desire to remain motivated to persist. The fact that the students felt they could accomplish their tasks with more autonomy added to their motivation.

In addition, the "cohort" model of the class proved to be beneficial to the students in their ability to feel related to one another. Several students had spoken about prior experiences in a GED class and described their experiences as "isolating" and "uncaring." In contrast to those experiences, the student participants found the program to resemble a community of learners who are all in similar situations as themselves. This sense of comfort in knowing that they were not alone in their endeavors appeared to be most valuable toward the middle or end of the semester when participants felt like dropping out or discontinuing the program.

Overall, students' beliefs in their abilities and outlook on their lives did change over the course of the program, but with the help of their ability to persist and remain motivated to complete the course. This motivation to persist went beyond reasons that many students state for enrolling in a course: family, children, and jobs. It also went beyond doing the course because of their families or for the teacher and program staff. Once they were further in the program, their motivation was enhanced through specific curricular programming that facilitated a development of self-determination within the students: a sense of competency, autonomy, and relatedness to peers. Rather than focusing on the external reasons for enrolling and continuing in the program,

the students' responses had shifted toward more internal, self-determined reasons for remaining in the course.

Although programs can do a great service to bring students into a program by drawing upon their initial sources of motivation, such as family, job, and personal goals, it seems that once students are in a program, their motivation to persist can be enhanced through specific programmatic ideas. These specific programmatic ideas include teacher instruction that helps build student confidence in their competency, instructional and programmatic support that allows them to feel autonomous in their actions, and cohort models with student peers for community building.

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[1] Countries that have entered Mutual Recognition Agreements with Engineers Canada include the UK (1989), Ireland (1989), New Zealand (1989), Hong Kong (1995), South Africa (1999), France (2005), Japan (2005), Singapore (2006), South Korea ("007), Taiwan (2007), and Malaysia (2009).